

# Introduction and Overview

**W**alk into any student union on a college campus and you'll find a group of students working on a project or discussing a class. Today, at a large table, we see a group involved in an intense discussion. They are all students in Professor Jackie Merritt's Listening class who learned today that they had to, as a group, write and perform a skit about listening in the workplace. Since this is the first week of school, they decided to meet so they could get to know each other better. Around the table we have Ben Goleman, Tamarah Jackson, Nolvía Gutierrez, NaMii Kim, Carter Bishop, and Radley Monroe. Let's listen to part of their conversation.

## CASE STUDY 1.1

### Getting to Know Our Students

Well, since I appear to be the oldest in this group, why don't I get things started? As you know, I'm **Tamarah Jackson** and I really appreciate you agreeing to meet at this time. Since I work full time in the city's public safety department, I can only meet after five. I'm an only child and grew up surrounded by members of the Choctaw Nation since my dad is a tribal elder. My mom is a social worker, and my dad is a plumber.

Cool! That's interesting. I bet your background will add a lot to our class discussions about listening. I'm **Ben Goleman** and, like Tamarah, I have some time constraints. I can't meet between sundown on Friday and sundown on Saturday. Friday evening my family observes

Shabbat and then attends synagogue on Saturday. I'm a middle child, and my mother is a physician and Dad is the VP of human resources at the auto plant here in town. He thought I picked a good class when I told him I was taking a listening class. He thinks it's a skill that can really help me in all aspects of life. I sure hope he's right; I hate the idea of just taking a class to get a grade.

I know what you mean. Some classes can be a real waste of time. But I think this one will be different. My name is **Carter Bishop**, and I'm a "second batch" kid. My parents had three girls, and then fifteen years later I came along. They split up when I was four. My mom and sisters and I stayed here. Dad moved to Chicago and

*(continued)*

## CASE STUDY 1.1 (Continued)

works for a PR firm there. Mom's a secretary in the dean's office. I know both of my parents think listening is important. Just last week, when I visited my dad, he talked about how important listening to his clients is to his success. He was giving me one of those get-your-act-together talks.

Oh, brother! You too, huh? I always thought the youngest kid was spared all of that. I'm the oldest of four, and my folks really seem to be zeroed in on me setting the bar for my sisters and little brother. I'm **Radley Monroe**. If you're from around here, you may have heard of my folks. Dad's the football coach at Mockingbird High. He was the first African-American to get a graduate degree from State U. He also teaches math, so he's pretty smart. Mom's Scout Monroe, one of the anchors of the six o'clock news on Channel 10.

Wow! My family never misses your mom's newscast. They will be so excited when I tell them that we are working on a project together. My name is **NaMii Kim**, and as you have probably figured out, I'm Korean. My grandparents immigrated here in the '50s. My dad is the eldest of their children and the only boy. My grandparents love to talk about Korean traditions. It's pretty interesting most of the time, but sometimes they don't exactly approve of the "modern" ideas my brothers and I have, and since they live with us, we get an earful. Maybe this class will help me listen to all the

different viewpoints. My dad works at the auto plant as an accountant and business manager. And, Ben, I think my dad knows your dad. My mother works in the cosmetics department of Merc's department store. Let me know if you need anything; I can get a discount.

Well, it looks like I'm the only one left. I'm **Nolvia Gutierrez**. Yeah, I know what you mean, NaMii, about grandparents and their old-school ideas. Mine came from Honduras and live next door to my family. But it actually has been a good thing. My dad had an accident a few years ago, and now he's a paraplegic. Thank goodness my grandparents were there. They really helped while dad went through operations, therapy, and all that stuff. My mom works as a pharmacist with Rex Drugs, and she really relied on them a lot to help my dad and to look after my brother and me.

It looks like we will have plenty of viewpoints to draw on as we develop our skit. Any ideas about what we should do? Maybe we could do one of those infomercials. You know, "Do you want to be a better friend or family member? A better student? A more successful employee? Even a better communicator? There is a skill that will help you become all of these things and more. What is that skill? Listening."

Say, Nolvia, that's great idea. I think we can find someone to be the loudmouth spokesperson. My friend Sam can probably help out with props . . . ■

## INTRODUCTION

As children, we are often praised and reinforced for speaking well. But how many of you were praised for "listening well"? For not interrupting? For being attentive? In school you are assigned speeches to give, and you can even take speaking classes. However, it is unlikely that you have received formal listening training before now. At best, you were exposed to a unit of listening as part of another class you have taken—public speaking, interpersonal communication, or music education.

Chances are classes aren't the only way you've learned about communication. You have made a lifetime study of the communication behaviors of those around you, particularly the communication habits and behaviors of significant people, such as your parents and friends. All of us tend to model our communication behaviors after those we observe. This holds true for listening as well. But just because you model your communication and listening on others in your lives doesn't mean you can't learn a great deal more about useful and effective listening behaviors.

As scholars and consultants in the field of communication and listening, we feel that listening is not just a critical communication competency; it is an important life competency. As a listener, you receive information that helps you to reach personal goals and develop and support relationships. Business owners often report that one of the skills they value most is listening.<sup>1</sup> As consultants, we often hear them complain that they have a hard time finding employees who listen effectively.

## LISTENING IS FUNDAMENTAL

### The Importance of Listening Competency

One reason we believe listening is a critical life competency is it is fundamental to all other communication competencies—speaking, writing, and reading. Of these competencies, listening is the first communication skill we acquire and use. In fact, you began to listen before you were born. Researchers have found that during the last trimester of a pregnancy, the fetus actively processes incoming auditory input. Fetuses at this stage can clearly distinguish among music, language, and other sounds.<sup>2</sup> So even at the very beginnings of human consciousness, listening plays an important role.

Listening is also key to learning language.<sup>3</sup> In fact, “learning to speak a language is very largely a task of learning to hear it.”<sup>4</sup> Infants are born with the ability to distinguish among all sounds—consonants and vowels—necessary to produce any human language.<sup>5</sup> However, if infants do not hear certain sounds, they eventually lose the ability to easily reproduce them. By 12 months, children have learned the sounds and rules of their native language. So an English-speaking child distinguishes between and can articulate both *R* and *L*, while a Japanese child does not. It is by listening that infants fine-tune their brains to Swahili instead of Spanish, or to English instead of Egyptian. Infants, then, learn to understand and master language by simply listening to us talk. This understanding of oral language becomes the basis for learning the details and language rules needed to accurately read and write. In fact, reading comprehension is highly correlated with listening comprehension.<sup>6</sup> This finding can be illustrated by how a number of children learn to read by first listening to others read aloud then listening to the words as they themselves read aloud. By reading aloud, children can recognize (by listening to their own voices) and self-correct their pronunciation.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately your abilities to “speak, read, write, and reason” are influenced by your listening ability.<sup>8</sup> As students, listening is fundamental to your personal and academic success.<sup>9</sup> Educator Joseph Beatty went even further, arguing that good listening is both an intellectual as well as a moral virtue because it is fundamental to understanding both yourself and others. He went on to say that it is only with good listening that you have the ability to “transform” yourself (and others). In other words, through listening you have the opportunity to “be all that you can be” and can help others do the same.

#### THINK ON IT

Can you think of a time when listening led you to discover something new about yourself? How did you react? Do you think you would have learned this about yourself if you hadn't learned it by listening to others?

## Listening Takes Time (Literally)

As the discussion and proposed skit at the beginning of this chapter suggest, listening is an important communication competency. But just how important is it? Of the many forms of communication—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—which is used the most?

Researcher Paul Rankin was the first to ask this question, in 1926. Results of Rankin's communication time study suggested that people in the early 20th century engaged in listening approximately 42 percent of their waking hours. Studies conducted since then have consistently supported Rankin's findings across a variety of populations and contexts. For example, research in the early 1970s showed that homemakers spent about 48 percent of their time listening, while businesspeople spent 33 percent of their time listening.<sup>10</sup> Another study assessing how students, employees, and homemakers spent their communication time found that 55 percent of that time was spent listening.<sup>11</sup> More recent studies found similar listening results.<sup>12</sup> Table 1.1 summarizes much of the time research that has been conducted over the past 70 years.

An interesting piece of information to keep in mind when looking at the results presented in this table is the effect of media usage on the time spent listening. As indicated in Table 1.1, some earlier studies included time spent listening to media in their calculation of the total percentage of time we spend listening. These studies were conducted before the explosion of computer and related communication technology over the past ten years. To get an accurate picture of how much time you and your colleagues actually spend listening, we must look at the effect of your use of the Internet, e-mail, Facebook, iPods, mobile phones, and so forth. The most recent time study available, reported in 2006 by listening scholars Laura Janusik and Andy Wolvin, measured media usage (including Internet and e-mail) and looked at communication in specific settings such as work and family/friend time.<sup>13</sup> They concluded that, on average, we spend at least 50 percent of our day listening to either another person or to media. However, given the ubiquitous nature of media technology, they speculate that the figure might actually be higher. Another interesting finding emerging from the Janusik and Wolvin study is that use of technology has affected how much time we interact face-to-face. Their research suggests that while overall communication time has increased, it appears that for the first time, we spend less than 50 percent of our communication time speaking (20 percent) and listening (24 percent). Listening associated with new media has apparently taken time from previous listening and speaking interactions. It is important to note that Janusik and Wolvin's study indicates that we still spend more time listening in a face-to-face context than we do in any other communication activity.

Taken as a whole, these studies indicate that you spend approximately half of your time communicating with others. And you spend at least half of your communication time listening.

Clearly, listening plays a significant role in our intellectual and social development as well as being critical to effective communication. To get us started in our exploration of this critical competency, we first discuss definitions of listening and review models of listening. We then introduce a new model of listening that we use throughout this book, and finally we provide an overview of the topics covered in this text.

**TABLE 1.1**

**Time Studies Showing the Percentage of Time in Various Communication Activities<sup>14</sup>**

Year	Study	Population	Time Listening	Time Speaking	Time Reading	Time Writing	Time with Media
1926	Rankin	Varied	.42	.32	.15	.11	
1971	Breiter	Homemakers	.48	.35	.10	.07	
1975	Weinrauch & Swanda	College students	.33	.26	.19	.23	
1975	Werner	Varied	.55	.23	.13	.08	
1980	Barker et al.	College students	.53*	.16	.17	.14	.20*
1990	Vickers	College students	.64*	.22	.08	.07	.31*
1999	Bohlken	College students	.53	.22	.13	.12	
2001	Davis	College students	.34	.31	.12	.10	
2006	Janusik & Wolvin	College students	.24**	.20	.08	.09	.39

\*Time spent listening to media is also included in total time spent listening.

\*\*Time spent listening doesn't include time spent listening to/using the media.

## Defining Listening

Even though listening is one of the most important skills you can develop, scholars haven't always agreed on just what constitutes listening competency. Perhaps the best overview of definitions of listening was written by Ethel Glenn in 1989. In that article she analyzed the content of fifty definitions of listening.<sup>15</sup> These definitions came from a variety of sources, including listening scholars, speech communication texts, and other communication research. A handful of the definitions Glenn covered is presented in Table 1.2.

Glenn concluded her article by stating, “[a] universal definition of listening from which operational guidelines may be established will not be easy to formulate.”<sup>16</sup> Her observations presented a challenge to scholars around the world involved in listening research. After much discussion and debate, in 1996 the members of the International Listening Association adopted the following definition: Listening is *“the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.”*<sup>17</sup> Today it is one of the most used definitions in both professional and academic listening publications.

### THINK ON IT

Looking at the definitions presented in Table 1.2, what do they have in common? How do they differ? How do they compare to the definition adopted by the members of the International Listening Association? Do you think the ILA definition should incorporate any other elements? Given the changes in technology since 1996, would you suggest any changes to the ILA's definition?

**TABLE 1.2****Definitions of Listening**

- The ability to understand spoken language (Rankin, 1926).
- The process of reacting to, interpreting, and relating the spoken language in terms of past experiences and further courses of action (Barbe & Meyers, 1954).
- The aural assimilation of spoken symbols in a face-to-face speaker audience situation, with both oral and visual cues present (Brown & Carlsen, 1955).
- The selective process of attending to, hearing, understanding, and remembering aural symbols (Barker, 1971).
- The process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind (Lundsteen, 1971).
- A rather definite and deliberative ability to hear information, to analyze it, to recall it at a later time, and to draw conclusions from it (Kelly, 1975).
- Three interwoven processes: (1) the physical reception of auditory stimuli, (2) the perception (symbolic classification) of the stimuli, and (3) the interpretation of the stimuli (Millar & Millar, 1976).
- The process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli (Wolvin & Coakley, 1985).
- . . . an intellectual or active function that involves the mind, eyes, ears, and memory (Vasile & Mintz, 1986).

## Models of Listening

Most of you are probably familiar with basic communication models that address the sender, receiver, message, feedback, and noise. These elements are combined with various others in a multitude of models. Based on these communication models, we have learned a great deal about constructing and sending messages. However, while you have spent much of your lives learning how to put together a message, this time is wasted if you don't also think about what happens when the other party receives it. So just as you are mindful about what goes into a message that you send, you need to be mindful of how incoming information is received and processed. To help us start down that road, we will next look at models of listening. The purpose of a **model** is to illustrate complex, abstract processes in such a way you have a clear understanding of how the process works.

Before introducing our model of listening (the WFH model), we need to look briefly at existing models. Belle Ruth Witkin reviewed a number of listening models in a 1990 article.<sup>18</sup> She divided the models into three broad areas: speech communication models, cognitive models, and speech science models.

## Speech Communication Models

Speech communication models look at listening within the context of a communication setting or as a communication-specific skill. Well-known examples of this category include models by Larry Barker and Andy Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley.<sup>19</sup> Essentially these models go beyond traditional communication models to emphasize